

As the shiny, smoke-belching locomotive charged westward, the woman riding at the front, on the small platform above and behind the cow-catcher, exulted in the new experience of speed and space and the beauty of her surroundings.

Tied securely to stanchions on the front of the engine, Lady

Jamaican-born Macdonald in 1868, soon after her marriage to Sir John Macdonald. Photo from public Archives of Canada.



for half of her life by then, having spent the first half in Spanish Town, Jamaica, the daughter of socially and politically prominent lawyer and landowner Thomas Bernard. After his death in a cholera epidemic in 1850, his widow and daughter went to live in England, while son Hewitt moved to what is now Canada's Province of Ontario and settled in the town of Barrie, north of Toronto. Once established, he sent for his mother and sister.

Almost unexpectedly, on November 7, 1885, the last span of the transcontinental railroad's track was fitted into place at Craigellachie, British Columbia, and the last spike driven home.

It was a momentous point in Canadian history, and its personal significance was not lost on Sir John.

"I now have some chance...of travelling over it in person before I am quite an angel," he told friends elatedly.

The first transcontinental train left Montreal, Quebec, on Monday, June 28, 1886, and arrived in Port Moody, British Columbia, on July 4. The timing was propitious, for Parliament was in recess for the Summer and the Macdonalds were able to make plans for a trip of their own.

The Canadian Pacific Railway Company promised a special train for the Prime Minister and his wife and set to designing an elaborate railway coach, equipped with every modern convenience, which would be the Macdonalds' home while they were away from Ottawa.

The Jamaica

It was named "The Jamaica" in honour of Lady Macdonald's country of birth.

For "The Chief" — as Lady Macdonald called her husband in her "Murray's Magazine" article — the trip was "the realization of the darling dream of his heart — a railway from ocean to ocean." In her opinion, in some 40 years of public life "no happier hours had come to him, I think, than these as he sits in 'The Jamaica' looking on the varied scenes through which we pass."

Although 50, Agnes Macdonald was still adventurous. She looked at the flat platform at the front of the engine, built above and behind

Macdonald's eyes sought out the new and the different, the beauty of the Rocky Mountains, with their snow-capped peaks and vast canyons and rivers, the huge trees and the wild flowers.

It was all a far cry from Jamaica, where she had been born and lived until her mid-teens, just as it was a far cry from her everyday life in Ottawa, as wife of Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald.

First person

Now, in July, 1886, she was one of the first people to be crossing Canada on the new transcontinental railway, and had left the elaborate railway coach designed for comfort and elegance in order to feel the wind on her face and experience something new and unique.

"Behold me now, with a soft felt hat well over my eyes, and a linen carriage-coat tucked around me from waist to foot," she would write in an account of the trip, published in "Murray's Magazine" in London, England, the following year. "This is lovely. I shall travel on this cowcatcher from summit to sea."

The idea of a transcontinental railway across Canada was one of the great engineering dreams of the last century. Faced with truly formidable problems in pushing the track through the Rocky Mountains — challenging snow-bound passes, huge gorges and rushing rivers — many applauded the idea, but declared its execution to be impossible. Prime Minister Macdonald was a believer, seeing the political and economic necessity for what would be the longest railway in the world, but, aged 65 — and always a realist — did not expect to live to see his dream come true. "I shall not be present [to ride on the railroad]," he said on one occasion. "I am an old man."

He did, however, expect that